

World Conference on Psychology and Sociology 2012

## Drug Users' Self-Representation at the Beginning of and after Rehabilitation

Elena Faccio <sup>a\*</sup>, Norberto Costa <sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup> *Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, Via Venezia, 8, 35131 Padova, Italy*

---

### Abstract

The aim of this study is to comprehend the evolution in the self-representations of drug users at the beginning and after at least six months from the start of a therapeutic rehabilitation program. Considering self-representation as attributions reflected in interactions, this paper takes into account personal constructs related to social relationships inside and outside the therapeutic community. Seventeen repertory grid interviews were collected from residents and newcomers' grids were compared to those of veterans using statistical techniques (Student t-test, iGridstat). Honesty seems to be the central construct around which drug users develop the idea of change regardless of length of stay in rehabilitation program. Its meaning is not related to compliance with the rules, but rather to breaking the silence that causes users to hide transgressions from the eyes of the community.

© 2013 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

Selection and peer review under the responsibility of Prof. Dr. Kobus Maree, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

*Keywords:* Therapeutic Community, Drug User, Self-Representations, Repertory Grid

---

### 1. Introduction

According to the *labeling theorists* (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1967; Matza, 1969), deviant phenomena may be analysed from a social point of view with respect to the contextual frame in which people act. As Lemert (1967) pointed out, deviance is not only a property of the action, but also the effect of social reactions that explicitly label the person who commits those kinds of acts as a transgressor. When this happens, we have what Lemert called "secondary deviance" and the consequence is that the person is stigmatized and identified as "not normal". Drug addiction may be seen as a kind of "stigma" (Goffman, (1963), an attribute that makes the addict different from other people, a sort of sign that can lead some to judge the person as bad, dangerous or weak. Stigmatized people follow a real "moral career": in the first phase the person knows and learns the points of view of "normal" people, internalizing the beliefs that society holds in reference to the stigma and on being signed. In the second phase, the person comprehends that he or she is labeled and understands the consequences of this sign. He or she analyzes the benefits and disadvantages and learns how to use this new face to his or her advantage. Some participants of the present study concluded the narration of their stories by saying that "addiction is a sort of job".

---

\* Corresponding Author Elena Faccio. Tel.: +390498277421

E-mail address: [elena.faccio@unipd.it](mailto:elena.faccio@unipd.it)

Following this metaphor, we might say that drug users in their everyday interactions alternate their “normal” clothes with those of the “stigma,” actively responding to situational expectations (Castelnuovo, 2008; Faccio, 2012; Faccio, 2011; Faccio, Centomo, & Mininni, 2011; Faccio, Cipolletta, Dagani, & Romaioli, 2012).

As each society defines the characteristics that members must have to be part of it, so a drug addict may be seen as a potential criminal, the undeserved beneficiary of free health care, who is incapable of sharing and respecting community values and scopes. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) would say, drug users live outside of the institutionalized definitions of reality and therefore they have to be rehabilitated in order to obtain the permission of society to re-enter. In that sense, the therapeutic community operates as a conceptual mechanism to re-introduce deviants to the hegemonic symbolic universe.

## 2. The study in the therapeutic community

This study was conducted in a Therapeutic Community for Drug Addictions in Modena, Italy. This community might be defined as “correctional” (Matza, 1969), as it acts as an inspiration model the “Project Man” program (Picchi, 1988), an intervention module for addiction that is widespread in Italy. It is articulated in three steps: 1. *Welcome*: is done to overturn the self-pitying profile that is considered typical of drug addicts and “confront” them with the immature and inadequate characteristics that are supposed to be the basis of their problems. 2. *The Therapeutic Community*, organized in a hierarchical way with a distinctive separation of roles between operators and users. This residential center is run on the basis of a reward and punishment philosophy to produce in residents a deep and definitive conversion of direction and values. 3. *Rehabilitation* is defined as the pursuance of growth in a less protected condition, such as in autonomous apartments. In this last phase, the “sane” identity of the renewed person is put to the test in reference to the external society.

This study was conducted during the second phase of this program. In particular, the aim of the study was to comprehend how the self-representations of users changed during their time in the community. We consider self-representation (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Gregg, 1991; Maturana & Varela, 1980; Simmel, 1890; James, 1890) to be the interpersonal mirror from which self-attributions are reflected and that depend on the people with whom individuals are interacting. Living in a therapeutic community may produce a single reflection and represent a condition that can produce important changes in the subjective reality of the residents. To investigate this dimension, first we conducted a four-month ethnographic observation in the field. The researcher entered the field as a trainee psychologist: the study was agreed with the community director in who allowed participant observations to be conducted to comprehend how the program was implemented in everyday work.

At the end of this observation period, 17 users were interviewed via the repertory grid technique (Kelly, 1955) using the following elements: *I* (present self); *I as I was before entering the community* (past self); *A person outside the community who I admire* (admired person outside the community); *I as I will be after rehabilitation* (future self); *A person outside the community who I don't like* (unaccepted person outside the community); *A person inside the community who I admire* (admired person inside the community); *I as I want to be* (ideal self); *A person inside the community who I don't like* (unaccepted person inside the community). To elicit the constructs salient to the participant the triad method (Fransella, Bell, & Bannister, 2003; Cipolletta, Faccio, & Berardi, 2010; Faccio, Castiglioni, & Bell, 2012) was used.

Gathered data was divided into two groups: the newcomers (N=9), i.e. residents in the community from less than six months, and oldies (N=8), i.e. people living in the community for more than six months. Women (N=4) were equally distributed between the two groups. In this way we explored whether the experience in the community tended to produce a homologated identity or to valorize personal resources.

### 2.1. Correlations analysis

The correlations analysis of grid elements shows positive values between *I as I will be after rehabilitation* and *I as I want to be* for 75% of the oldies group and for the 55.6% for the newcomers. This result indicates that, both oldies and newcomers were more trustworthy in the rehabilitation program in order to become as they wanted to

be. Moreover, the oldies felt closer to their futures outside the community, as for the 50% of them there was a positive correlation between *I* and *I as I will be after rehabilitation*, as opposed to the newcomers, among whom there was low correlation in the 77.8% of cases (correlation significance threshold taken: 0.75 (Armezzani, Grimaldi, & Pezzullo, 2003). When users demonstrated that they were able to follow community rules and proved to operators to be trustworthy, their reentry in society would get closer. Moreover, as punishments and rewards were given during community reunions, these positive behaviors were indicated to newcomers as a model to follow. There is no surprise in fact that there was a positive correlation in both groups between the elements *I as I want to be* and *A person inside the community who I admire* (O=75%; N=55.6%).

A very interesting result is revealed by the analysis of the correlation between *I as I was before entering the community* and *I as I will be after rehabilitation*. In fact, while for 62.5% of oldies there is a negative correlation, for 88.9% of newcomers there is low correlation. This might mean that the majority of oldies tended to consider their future selves as embodying the opposite of those features that had characterized their past lives. On the other hand, newcomers tended to see themselves via a combination of self-attribution comparable to their past lives and other features that concerned their actual selves.

Finally the analysis between *I* and *I as I was before entering the community* shows low correlation for the majority of both groups (O=62.5%; N=88.9%). This result shows that a person surely changes his or her self-representation solely by entering a rehabilitation program.

## 2.2. Euclidean distances

The analysis of Student t-test on the Euclidean distances between couples of elements (Bell, 2002; Cipolletta, 2011), shows that the self-representations of both groups are similar. Newcomers and oldies represented themselves far away from the images of their past selves and closer to their projections of their future living in society. Residents tend to show very little self-acceptance (Cipolletta, Faccio, & Berardi, 2010), as the distance between *I* and *I as I want to be* is high in both groups. The representative differences that Student t-test elicits have to do with the different image those oldies and newcomers had in reference to their fellow residents in the community (Table 1). Time spent in the institute led them to identify as models those who observed “proper behavior”. The distance between the people admired inside the community and disliked people tended to grow wider in relation to time spent in the community. This was probably powered by the use of public shame by the operators when a resident did not follow community rules.

In fact, analyzing the constructs elicited in the grids, it emerges that *honesty* and *sincerity* are present in the majority of the interviews (76.5%). Users quickly become involved in the system of confrontations that directs the community’s philosophy. Inside the community the term “confrontation” refers to a situation in which a user breaks the rules and another is witness of the act. This is charged with the responsibility of “confronting” the transgressor, i.e. to make him or her aware of the violation and then report to operators what happened. Honesty is intended as the breaking of silence that would make users cover each other irregular behavior. The one who reports violations to educators is not considered a squealer or an informer, but an honest and sincere person who “lovingly” (the word used by the operators themselves) communicates to the community and to the transgressor his or her weakness. In this frame it is hard to say whether this push to truthfulness represented an ideological value or a pragmatic social control system. Anyway, the result in terms of identity construction of the users is a boost of conformant actions on the surface that cover an amount of little transgressions by several members of the community. A research carried out in Italian therapeutic communities (Salvini & Galieni, 2002) claims that programs like “Project Man” tend to produce conformism and a duple way of living of the residents: a public one that is clean, honest and abstinent, and a private one made of transgressions and actions against the group ideology. During the ethnographic observation we could experience how in fact those veterans that publicly reflected the community values and were then elected as models to follow, at a later time were discovered engaged in a whole amount of transgressions of the program rules. It was found out that they were the perpetrators of thefts against the institution and other inmates, alcohol trades and forbidden sexual behavior with the women community. The revelation was made in a reunion with all residents and educators and the positive

models were then turned into the evidence of a relapse into the drug addict personality. Severe punishments were inflicted, from hard cleaning duties to exits suspensions or even expulsions. On the other hand, the honest residents that first reported these unacceptable behaviours were awarded with special working positions.

Content analysis indicates that honesty construct is often superordinated to other constructs. This means that for the majority of users, a honest person is also “positive,” “altruistic,” “normal” and “happy.” This may be the biggest change in self-representation that the community produces. The institute imposes a value on which all the other qualities are based. Being honest means not hiding faults and weaknesses, or, to use Goffman’s (1963) idea, not to hide the stigma. In fact, as the author pointed out (Goffman, 1961), correctional institutes don’t lead to the achievement of a normal status, but they lead to the transformation of the person from a blame status to the position of someone who was able to correct it. According to this, a person that concludes his or her rehabilitation cannot be seen as different from a drug addict, but only as a better drug addict. The deviant role becomes absolute in interpersonal perception and all actions that are not in line with the typing of the dominant role are denied or not recognized (Rimaioli, & Faccio, 2012; Romaioli, Faccio, & Salvini, 2008). The complexity of the individual and of his experiences is thus reduced to an idea of him (Rimaioli & Contarello, 2012; Vidotto, Bertolli, & Romaioli, 2010; Vidotto, Romaioli, & Vicentini, 2006).

### *2.3. Conclusions*

This study highlights how this rehabilitation program leads to qualitative changes in self-representation as it utilizes honesty as a landmark on which users may shape their personal identities. Honesty is a value that can be used to turn a drug addict into a normal person, at least on surface. Despite this stereotypical way of constructing normality, users may still face difficulties in reference to freeing themselves from their “addict” identities. In these kinds of programs, labeling mechanisms can be active in an implicit way, as deviance from community rules is immediately identified and put to blame. The inability on part of users to follow the rules is seen, in these cases, as an effect of the immaturity and fickleness that characterizes drug users. A rehabilitation program organized in this way may represent for some aspects a consolidation of this stigmatization process that may produce a “global deviant identity” (Lemert, 1967). Rehabilitation can be seen as a social control system that imposes on users: 1) an anomalous conception of himself or herself and the world; 2) strict rules to follow; 3) acceptance of the dominant values and the moral ideology. In this way those with addiction problems are able to develop a self-representation as deviants as that is mirrored by the people with whom they interact in the community context (Vidotto, Romaioli, & Vicentini, 2006). Following these premises, this self-representation will hold tight the users to their deviant career.

### 3. Tables

Table 1. Student t-test comparison of the Euclidean distances means between elements which relate to the main variables explored in the two groups of subjects (Newcomers and Oldies)

Elements	Subject Category	Subjects Number	Average	Standard Deviation	T	P
Present self – Past self	Newcomer	9	7,9267	3,17566	-1,217	,242
	Oldie	8	10,0750	4,09287		
Present self – Future self	Newcomer	9	5,4444	3,26626	,246	,809
	Oldie	8	5,0625	3,11445		
Present self – Admired person inside the community	Newcomer	9	6,9811	2,96461	,761	,458
	Oldie	8	5,8050	3,40737		
Present self – Ideal self	Newcomer	9	7,3622	3,56947	,811	,430
	Oldie	8	6,0838	2,82537		
Present self – Unaccepted person inside the community	Newcomer	9	10,7922	2,83132	-1,087	,294
	Oldie	8	12,1650	2,30431		
Past self – Future self	Newcomer	9	9,8033	2,85336	-1,509	,152
	Oldie	8	12,2125	3,71934		
Past self – Admired person inside the community	Newcomer	9	9,4433	3,40031	-1,802	,092
	Oldie	8	12,5500	3,70801		
Past self – Ideal Self	Newcomer	9	11,0389	2,98691	-,773	,451
	Oldie	8	12,3113	3,79144		
Future self – Admired person inside the community	Newcomer	9	5,6444	3,20710	2,753	,015
	Oldie	8	2,0363	1,95741		
Future self – Ideal self	Newcomer	9	4,3633	3,05469	1,618	,127
	Oldie	8	2,3325	1,90767		
Admired person inside the community – Ideal self	Newcomer	9	5,2044	2,93932	2,464	,026
	Oldie	8	2,2413	1,80259		
Admired person inside the community – Unaccepted person inside the community	Newcomer	9	10,9322	1,84593	-2,880	,011
	Oldie	8	14,0263	2,56554		

### References

- Armezzani, M., Grimaldi, F., & Pezzullo, L. (2003). *Tecniche costruttiviste per l'indagine della personalità*. Milano: McGraw Hill.
- Becker, H.S. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.
- Bell, R. (2002). *GRIDSTAT. Program for analyzing data of repertory grids*. Melbourne, Australia: University of Melbourne.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Castelnuovo, G., Faccio, E., Turchi, G., Salvini, A., Molinari, E., & Imbasciati, A. (2008). Time for the single researcher impact factor (letter), response to Hobbs R. "Should we ditch impact factors?" *BMJ* 2007; 334: 569, 336(7648), 789.
- Cipolletta, S. (2011). Self-construction and interpersonal distances of juveniles living in residential communities. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 24(2), 122-143.
- Cipolletta, S., Faccio, E., & Berardi, S. (2010). Body-piercing: Does it modify self-construction? A research with repertory grids. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 7, 85-95.
- Faccio, E. (2011). What works with individuals in a clinical setting? *Front. Psychology*, 2(2). doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00002
- Faccio, E. (2012). *The corporeal identity: When the self-image hurts*. New York: Springer.
- Faccio, E., Castiglioni, M., & Bell, R.C. (2012). Extracting information from repertory grid data: New perspectives on clinical and assessment practice, *TPM - Testing, Psychometrics, Methodology in Applied Psychology*, 19(3), 177-196. doi: 10.4473/TPM19.3.3
- Faccio, E., Centomo, C., & Mininni, G. (2011). "Measuring up to measure" Dysmorphophobia as a language game. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 45(3), 304-324. doi: 10.1007/s12124-011-9179-2
- Faccio, E., Cipolletta, S., Dagani, J., & Romaioli, D. (2012). Auditory hallucinations as a personal experience: analysis of non-psychiatric voice hearers' narrations. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, in press.
- Fransella, F., Bell, R., & Bannister, D. (2003). *A manual for repertory grid technique* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Chichester: Wiley.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums. Essays on the social situations of mental patients and other inmates*. New York: Vintage Anchor Publishing.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.
- Gregg, G. S. (1991). *Self-representation: Life narrative studies in identity and ideology*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- James, W. (1890). *Principles of psychology*. New York: McMillan.

- Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc.
- Lemert, E. (1967). *Human deviance, social problems and social control*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Maturana, H., & Varela, F. (1980). *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living*. Boston: New Science Library.
- Matza, D. (1969). *Becoming deviant*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Picchi, M. (1988). *Progetto Uomo, un programma terapeutico per tossicodipendenti (Project man, a therapeutic program for drug addicts)*. Cinisello Balsamo, IT: Edizioni Paoline.
- Romaoli, D., & Contarello, A. (2012). How do therapists understand their client's problem and its resolution. Objectification in theories of change. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 42(2), 93-100.
- Romaoli, D., & Faccio E. (2012). When therapists do not know what to do: Informal types of eclecticism in psychotherapy. *Research in Psychotherapy, Psychopathology, Process and Outcome*, in press.
- Romaoli, D., Faccio, E., & Salvini, A. (2008). On acting against one's best judgement: A social constructionist interpretation for the akrasia problem. *Journal for The Theory of Social Behaviour*, 38 (2), 179–192. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5914.2008.00365.x
- Salvini, A., & Galieni, N. (2002). *Diversità, devianze e terapie*. Padova: Upsel Domenighini
- Simmel, G. (1890). In K. Wolff (Ed.), *The sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.
- Vidotto, G., Bertolli, C., & Romaoli, D. (2010). Da Eysenck a Costa e McCrae: una proposta per il cambiamento della Scheda 5 del CBA. *Giornale Italiano di Medicina del Lavoro ed Ergonomia*, Supplemento B, Psicologia 3 (32), 63-70.
- Vidotto, G., Romaoli, D., & Vicentini, M. (2006). L'akrasia tra riflessioni antiche e moderne - Verso un modello cognitivo dell'akrasia. *Giornale Italiano Di Medicina Del Lavoro ed Ergonomia*, 28(3), 111-118.